

In 1996, when Congress enacted federal “welfare reform,” lives across the country changed, including the lives of more than 25,000 low-income students pursuing degrees at CUNY campuses across New York City. Large numbers of these students were single mothers working to obtain the college degree that would enable them to lift their families out of poverty, but the new law—which mandated harsh new “workfare” requirements—made it virtually impossible for these students to continue their education.

Indeed, the federal law, coupled with a particularly aggressive campaign by then mayor Rudy Giuliani’s administration to slash the city’s welfare rolls, forced thousands of low-income CUNY students to abandon school—and the promise of living-wage employment—to take up “workfare” positions, raking leaves in the parks, sweeping streets, and the like. “Not only did the City’s approach senselessly harm thousands of struggling families,” said Stephen Loffredo, director of CUNY Law’s Economic Justice Project, “it was also enormously counterproductive from a policy perspective.”

Empirical studies showed that nearly 90 percent of welfare recipients permitted to earn a baccalaureate degree from CUNY obtained substantial employment and exited the welfare system permanently. By contrast, parents forced out of school and into the first low-wage job available overwhelmingly remained in poverty and tended to cycle back into welfare.

In response to this social justice crisis, CUNY Law launched the Economic Justice Project (EJP) in 1997. EJP students work on several fronts, including providing direct representation to CUNY undergraduates facing challenges to their workfare requirements and pressing for the adoption of more rational and humane policies. EJP students also work with community anti-poverty organizations, principally the Welfare Rights Initiative (WRI), an activist organization mobilizing low-income students that emerged at CUNY’s Hunter College.

EJP and WRI’s collaboration has reached more than 1,000 CUNY students and has achieved important successes in shifting public policy, including the Work Study and Internship Law. This state statute substantially increased access to college for people receiving public assistance. Currently, the EJP–WRI collaboration is focused at the state level on legislation that would permit four-year college students to count academic work toward workfare requirements. At the federal level, EJP and WRI are working on the 2010 Congressional reauthorization of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program.

“The mutual reinforcement between legal advocacy, law reform, and grassroots activism makes it possible to deepen our impact,” said Loffredo. He also noted that the collaboration

offers a new model for social justice movement building. “Our commitment of legal resources to advance grassroots organizing efforts both borrows from ’60s-era strategies and attempts to move beyond them. We encourage our students to think creatively, though perhaps with some humility, about the various ways in which law and its practitioners can contribute to movements for progressive social change.” ••

## ECONOMIC JUSTICE PROJECT

Graduation as an Anti-Poverty Strategy



*Economic Justice Project Director Stephen Loffredo*